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Testimony from a Soviet defector

In spite of modern communications, the Atlantic Ocean sometimes seems like an impassable moat as in the failure of the American press to cover the recent defection to the British of the most interesting KGB officer to change sides in a long time.

In a healthy break with previous practice, the Thatcher government made Ilya Dzhirkvelov available to *The Times* of London as soon as he had been determined to be an authentic defector and not a double agent. Instead of being kept under wraps to protect the fragile structure of detente, he was given the chance to tell his story last month in a series of five fascinating interviews run prominently in *The Times* but given no coverage here.

This defector lacks the towering indignation of a Solzhenitsyn or the moral lucidity of a Sakharov. But his testimony, coming from a middle-level official, is probably more representative of how a great many Russians feel and carries a message both of warning and hope to worried Westerners.

In this mid-50s, Ilya Dzhirkvelov was of Georgian birth like Stalin and he still has an ambivalent respect for the dead dictator. As a true-believing Marxist, he joined the secret police at an early age and rose through the ranks of the

KGB's first directorate until he was assigned, under Tass cover, to serve as a Soviet agent in Africa. His last post was press officer for the World Health Organization in Geneva, where his KGB assignment was to orchestrate covert Soviet propaganda throughout the specialized agencies of the U.N.

Exposed over the years to the realities of life in the West in contrast to the distorted version fed by the regime to the Russian people, he became completely disillusioned with the Communist Party elite. He came to see them as a self-appointed and self-serving "aristo-bureaucracy" living behind a wall of special privilege and self-deception.

Finally, with his career at a dead end as the result of what he claims is pervasive favoritism, the invasion of Afghanistan was for him the last straw. By ingenious advance planning, he managed to escape safely with his wife and child to England and was given political asylum. Having left no hostages behind, there were no threats the regime could use against him, and he leaped at the chance to tell his story to *The Times*.

Regarding Soviet policy in Africa which he saw at first hand, Dzhirkvelov is devastating in his criticism. Although he is convinced there are very few true-believing Marxists left in the Soviet bureaucracy, the men in the Politburo demanded a

rigid application of ideological doctrine that had no relevance to complex African tribal problems. As a result, they sank huge sums in a series of abortive communist coups from Tanzania to the Sudan.

He sees the Soviet military intervention with Cuban troops in Angola and Ethiopia "as a gambler's throw to turn the tide," which at least temporarily succeeded because of Western failure to meet the challenge.

More frightening for the future is his description of the extent to which the Politburo is continuously and deliberately misled by ambitious party careerists down the line who report to the Kremlin what they think it wants to hear about the increasing strength of communist movements. This is a species of dangerous self-deception that many thought went out of fashion with the death of Stalin but Dzhirkvelov gives numerous recent examples.

In fact, he thinks that the Soviet lunge into the quagmire of Afghanistan was prompted by just such a combination of ideological preconceptions at the top and careerist-motivated disinformation from below. He reports a consensus among his KGB colleagues in Geneva that the Afghan invasion was "a senseless and irrational step. We thought it was complete

madness.

Dzhirkvelov is even more critical of the regime's over-centralized attempt to control every aspect of economic and cultural life. For everyone except the ruling elite with its privileged access to special stores, economic conditions are described as "catastrophic." He sees a direct connection between the permanent scarcity of consumer goods and the ruinous increase of alcoholism and widespread bribery.

As *The Times* editorializes, this loss of faith in the official ideology and this disastrous failure of the system to meet consumer needs may further tempt Brezhnev and his heirs to seek justification for their privileged rule in foreign military triumphs that can appeal to Russian chauvinism. Military power is, after all, the one solid achievement of this aristo-bureaucracy, and they have demonstrated the will to use it.

If the U.S. and its Western allies can summon up in time the strength to contain Russian expansionism, there is eventual hope for a more open society in the accumulating dissatisfactions that Dzhirkvelov so vividly describes. He sees a portent of changes to come in "the immense growth" of the Russian audience that listens to Western radio broadcasts.